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THE SLATE INDUSTRY IN THE GDR

Ernst Greiner, Berlin

Conditions in the Slate Industry

For several centuries, slate has been mined in Germany. The principal regions of slate production in the German Democratic Republic are the Frankenwald (Lehesten), the Thueringer Wald (Loquitz Valley), and Steinad. In addition, there are also some deposits, though of less importance, in Sachsen, the products of which at present are used only as the raw materials for milled products.

During World War II, above-ground installations, as well as mine shafts and mining sites, were partially destroyed. Miners who had worked there for decades have now managed to put the mines back in operation on a productive basis.

Slate mines which are of any importance have since 1949 become people's property. The mining ordinance of 10 August 1950 has made it possible for the slate mining industry to realize further development and to mobilize all available resources for the reconstruction of the GDR economy. Two industrial trade schools have assumed the task of training skilled personnel for the slate industry. Large expenditures for combating silicosis demonstrate that the government of the GDR gives full support to the slate industry in its efforts to eliminate this disease, which, heretofore, has always been an impediment to the development of slate mining.

Slate as a Raw Material

Slate mined in Thueringen and in the Frankenwald is suitable for use in the construction and electrical industries, for roofing and wall slate, and as lining material. In the construction of the planetarium which the workers of the GDR presented as a gift to I. V. Stalin on his 70th birthday, Thueringen slate

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was used. The electrical industry uses slate from Thueringen in the construction of switchboards and as insulation material for resistors. Thueringen slate has an insulation capacity of up to 3,000 volts. The Silur slate mined at Steinad is suitable for making slate pencils.

At Steinad, there is also a deposit of Devonian slate, which can be used as abrasive and insulation material. Honing stones for razors and surgical instruments are also made at Steinad. The Devonian slate can be worked in the same way as metal, on lathes, milling machines, and planers. Thus, it is possible to shape it in any fashion or to cut threads in it. It is even used in the manufacture of writing implements, vases, and bowls. The texture of this slate is so beautiful that it can be polished to a marble-like appearance.

The most important product of the slate industry is roofing and wall slate. Before the war, the Lehesten and Loquitz areas had an output equal to that of all other German slate mines. At present, about 55 percent of the prewar production level has been attained.

Labor in the Slate Industry

The majority of the slate miners come from the US zone. By an agreement, it was possible to put 250 unemployed workers from Bavaria to work /in the GDR/. Enterprises which had previously employed 300-400 workers now employ only 150 because there are not enough technical workers in the GDR. By the establishment of two schools for apprentices, conditions have been created for solving the problem of developing a future labor force.

No coal is expended in the mining and processing of roofing and wall slate, in contrast with production of roofing tile. Some power is required for the production of compressed air and illumination of the mines and buildings. Durability of slate is unlimited, and in the central mountainous areas and those where snowfall is heavy, it is a material well adapted for use in all types of roofing. At Kronach, houses which had slate roofs laid in 1630 have /recently/ been reroofed; this gives a clear demonstration of the durability of Thueringen slate.

Future Prospects

Waste produced in slate processing is converted in slate mills to slate flakes and slate powder. Thus, waste piles are eliminated, and the economics of production are improved. Slate powder replaces kaolin and talc in the production of pesticides and in the rubber industry; it is used also in large quantities by the chemical industry as carrier for Gesarol and other pesticides. Slate flakes are used on roofing paper and replace talc, which has to be imported from Norway.

The GDR slate industry provides means for conserving valuable foreign currency and also for acquiring such currency through export of slate powder in the form of Gesarol, slate pencils, slate blackboards, and roofing and wall slate. The Five-Year Plan provides approximately 9 million Deutsche marks for expanding capacity, for improving the social status of miners, and for mining new slate deposits. With this investment, it will be possible to increase slate production by about 165 percent. Prewar production levels will be attained in 1954. By introduction of new work methods, development of new machinery, and mechanization of mining, the economy of slate works will be substantially improved. Research work will offer further possibilities for the use of slate. It is the task of workers, executives, and engineers to make possible replacement of many other valuable raw materials by the use of slate products.

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